January/February 2007

Diversity Leadership Guide

Cultural Diversity

The Language of Cultural Diversity

Employee diversity often adds value to the workplace. Everyone, including you, is part of today's multicultural workplace. Diversity is about you, your attitudes, your beliefs, and your ability to work well with other people.

With cultural diversity comes broader perspectives and ways of looking at issues. Now more than ever, we can tap into and use knowledge and skills from a variety of sources and cultures. Diverse workplaces let us experience other cultures, but even more importantly, we can see culture through a variety of perspectives.

Diversity is approached differently than it once was, and it's important to understand how it is viewed today. By learning the language of cultural diversity, we can create a baseline understanding of key trends.

* **Ethnocentrism**—Ethnocentrism refers to the belief that one's own group and culture is superior to others. This can be accompanied by a feeling of contempt for other groups and cultures. Ethnocentrism may be a natural source of prejudice and has particular impact on one's attitudes when young. While it is important for individuals to build a sense of identity and self-esteem, people sometimes develop the mistaken belief that others are not as good as they are.

* **Assimilation**—Assimilation refers to the process of how people of diverse ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds gradually adopt the customs and attitudes of the prevailing culture, often leaving their culture of origin behind. In this process of assimilation, there was a certain pressure to adopt the language, customs, and behaviors that were seen as the norm, in order to gain acceptance. Today, the process of assimilation is changing from a situation where one group dominates another to one where minority and majority converge.

* **Acculturation**—Today, acculturation, not assimilation, is considered appropriate. Acculturation means taking on one or more cultural traits of many groups, resulting in retaining one's original culture. People are sharing their culture instead of ignoring it. One need only look at restaurant choices to see acculturation in action. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday is a federal holiday, and many communities hold festivals for Cinco de Mayo. People are proud of who they are and what they add to the workplace.

* **Multicultural**—Lastly, the word multicultural refers to many cultures. When referring to diversity, it means valuing the differences of others and creating an environment that does not require assimilation. This is the goal of diversity training—to support people in the expression of who they are and what they add to the workplace.

Cultural Concepts

Differences in lifestyle choices and values vary among different cultural groups. People express their values and preferences in the way they approach time and space and in the way they communicate with others. It is critical to understand the components that shape our cultural diversity and to recognize the many ways in which one's values can differ. Culture, of course, is not static. Not all people from a particular culture behave , interpret, or internalize the same. Because something might be generally true about the community does not make it true for each individual member of that community. The information provided here is general and intended to stimulate dialogue and information sharing.

Individualism

Individualism emphasizes the role of the individual over the role of the group. People operate independently and are expected to take care of themselves. Individual identity is essential, and speaking one's mind is a sign of honesty, even if it results in conflict.

The motivation in an individualistic culture is achievement and power; accomplishing tasks is more important than relationships. Most northern and western European countries, the United States, Canada, and Australia represent cultures that place a high value on individualism.

Collectivism

Collectivism refers to those cultures in which individual interests are subordinate to those of the group. Cohesive groups protect their members in exchange for loyalty and obedience.

Social control is based upon the fear of losing face and the possibility of shame. Motivation in a collectivistic community tends toward the interpersonal. Relationships are valued over task accomplishment. Conflict is seen as a negative thing. The employer-employee relationship is like a family connection. Cultures with a high value on collectivism include many Asian, Arab, Latin American, and southern European cultures.

Communication Differences
Communication is one of the key areas in which diversity can create challenges. Different types of people tend to have different ways of expressing themselves. We often hear or make unkind remarks when others display behavior that we consider inappropriate or unacceptable in our culture.

Formal cultures place a high emphasis on following business protocol and social customs. In a formal culture, managers would be addressed as Mr. Smith or Ms. Miller. This is typified in Asian cultures, which are known for greater formality. Informal cultures, notably the United States, dispense with ceremony and are more casual in the workplace. Employees may address their bosses by their first names.

The level of directness and explicitness that individuals display in their communication is determined largely by their particular culture. In the United States, Switzerland, and Germany, people are very direct; they rely heavily on the spoken word. Conflict is dealt with in a head-on, direct fashion.

Emotional Expression
Cultures also differ in their expression of emotion. Members of some cultures tend to show their feelings more than others. They often touch or hug one another. The cultures of Latin America, southern Europe, and the Middle East are more expressive. In other cultures, members tend to keep their feelings carefully controlled and subdued.

Cultural Concepts (cont'd)

Time Differences

An individual's use of time may communicate as profoundly as her words. Someone's workplace behavior may be misinterpreted if it is not understood from the cultural perspective of the individual.

Individuals gravitate towards one of two approaches to time. These approaches are:

* **Single-focus**—Single-focus people focus on one thing at a time, with a commitment to the schedule. In general, Americans, many Asian cultures, and people of northern European heritage are single-focused.

* **Multi-focus**—Multi-focus people enjoy handling multiple tasks at once. They may be more interested in relationships with people and comfortable with plans changing. They simply go with whatever needs to be done. Southern Europeans, Middle Easterners, and Latin Americans tend to be multi-focused.

Punctuality

Cultures are distinguished in two ways with regard to punctuality. If punctuality is defined precisely, then it is fixed. Meetings are expected to begin on time. Deadlines and schedules are taken seriously. Northern Europeans, Americans, and the Japanese are oriented towards a fixed view of time.

When punctuality is defined loosely, it is said to be fluid. Meetings begin when people are ready. Delays are expected and part of the norm. There is a largely open-ended approach to getting things done. Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East are more fluid about time.

Spatial Preferences

The use and meaning of space is an important and often neglected aspect of culture. There is a distinction between private and public spaces. People in different cultures also have contrasting needs for their personal space, that is, the comfortable distance between individuals.

The following describe different types of space and how these are viewed by different cultures:

* **Private office space**—This is illustrated by closed-door meetings, private offices, and partitions. Managers are separate from their employees. Permission must be granted to enter a private space. In the United States, supervisors are often found in corner offices on an upper floor.

* **Public space**—This is depicted with large rooms and few partitions. Managers sit with or near other employees. There are more interruptions, and permission is not necessary to enter the space. In Japan or France, supervisors might be found in the middle of their subordinates.

* **Personal space**—This refers to how much space is between two individuals. Standards vary across cultures. A comfortable social distance for Latin Americans or Arabs is equivalent to an intimate distance for most Americans.

There are significant differences in lifestyles and values between different cultural groups. Individuals express their values through time, communication, and space. It is critical to communicate about cultural differences.

Idea for Dialogue

Self-Identity

An exploration into your perception of others must begin with your sense of self. Your own identity is the frame of reference by which you experience other people. It is the starting point for all comparison and contrast with others, and it filters your experiences with other people.

Consider the cultural components of your identity and begin to assemble a picture of who you are. These may impact the people you associate with socially, your values and beliefs, as well as the way you live your life. Your experiences are filtered through this sense of self and are the focal point for your interactions with other people.

Some questions to ask yourself are:

* How does my identity affect my perception?
* Is there another perspective from which to view this?
* Do I think my perspective is the only right one?
* Can I learn to appreciate the value of other viewpoints and styles?
* Do I prefer being around people who have the same preferences?
* How well do I work with people who have different styles?
* What does recognizing my cultural identity accomplish?

Understanding your values and perceptions will help you form your cultural profile. It speaks not only to who you are, but what you believe, think, and feel.

As you can see, who you are impacts your experience of everything around you. These values impact the types of people you prefer, as well as your approach to tasks at work. When in a delicate situation of any kind, it may be useful to ask yourself how your background, values, and communication styles are affecting the outcome.

Source: SkillSoft HR0152 SkillBriefs

NASA Contact: AD/Vanessa Webbs

diversity@grc.nasa.gov

http://www.grc.nasa.gov/WWW/diversity